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ABSTRACT

Four years ago Sterling College began to develop a competency curriculum. This document presents a working definition and basic assumptions about this curriculum. The curriculum includes 9 college-wide competencies that are required for graduation and that are predicted on several basic assumptions: (1) The curriculum includes the total program of the college: academics, extracurricular, and general campus life. (2) Competency leads to accountability through a clearer statement of institutional objectives. (3) Competency also leads to wholeness because broadly-based objectives bring academic programs, student services, and extracurricular activities together into an integrated and meaningful relationship. (4) Competency also leads to relevance for a broader clientele. (Author/PG)

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"COMPETENCY" IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

(A paper presented at the AAHE meeting in Chicago, March 11,1974)

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Before I attempt to answer the question which has been put to us--that is, "What constitutes competency in the liberal arts?"--I would like to make a few general remarks. What I hope to share with you today is not a completed model but rather a working definition, a set of basic assumptions, some food for thought for those of you who are curious about, interested in, about to begin or already developing a competency based curriculum for a liberal arts college.

Since Sterling College first began to develop its competency curriculum some four years ago, there has been a tremendous increase of interest in the approach to education which is implied in this word "competency." Because so many people are beginning to use the term in so many different contexts, it is becoming apparent that "competency" means different things to different people. To the vocational and proprietary schools it has something to do with "guaranteed marketable skills"; to the teachers college it has to do with "professional performance"; to the department chairman in physics or philosophy it is somehow related to what he used to call "major requirements." It is therefore clear that if liberal arts colleges are going to use the term to describe a whole curriculum, we need to decide what "competency" means to us. I doubt that all of us could ever get complete agreement at this point, but I believe it is essential that we be heard along with those who talk more particularly of measurable skills, behavioral objectives, etc.

Dr. Richard Meeth from SUNY at Buffalo has suggested a useful denini-tion: "Competency in education is the minimum knowledge, skills, values

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and/or attitudes a person can be judged to possess based on a set of criteria or level of expectation." I like this definition because it gives some room for the "values" and "attitudes" those of us in liberal arts education hold so dear. It speaks also of competency a person can be "judged to possess," rather than "measured to possess" or "certified to possess"--all of which gives room for subjective evaluation, which I feel to be an essential ingredient in assessing competency in the liberal arts college. We need to measure what we can measure--but we need to defend to the death our right to use subjective evaluation where precise measurement is not possible. At Sterling, for example, one of our competencies has to do with understanding the relevance of the Christian heritage to one's life and community. A common way in which students demonstrate this competence, at least in part, is by out-of-class involvement in church and community projects. The evaluation is done by a team made up of faculty, students, and community persons. We are simply willing to accept their consensus evaluation regarding student competency in this area.

I have some difficulty with the Meeth definition when I try to apply it to a whole curriculum. The definition is more useful in speaking of competency in a subject or major area, perhaps, or in a pre-professional or professional program. In addition, no matter how carefully one words a definition of "competency" it always comes out as having to do primarily with what a person can do, his abilities, powers, etc. In the Christian liberal arts context we are also concerned with what kind of person the student is, or is becoming.

In other words, we are concerned with a synergism--a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. We are concerned with the development of a life style or a life philosophy. At Sterling we are still searching

for the precise definition of competence which encompasses all the things we are trying to do. Perhaps we will have to coin a new word to convey our notion of "Competency-Plus." The question still remains--How are these various concerns to be brought together into a liberal arts curriculum that can be called competency-based?

Each school will have to find its own distinctive answers to this question, and the answers will have to reckon with institutional identity and purposes, with student profile, and with many other factors. What we have done at Sterling, therefore, can serve only to give you some ideas about how you might begin.

Let me assure you at the outset that although we are now in the second year of operation with our new curriculum, we are far from a fully-developed model. Since no other liberal arts school had such a college-wide program when we began, we were working without any model to look at. We made the decision to begin with what amounted to a sketchy outline and to develop the details of our curriculum as we went along. A small school like ours can do this more easily, obviously, than can a larger, more complex institution. Our curriculum is still <u>in process</u>. Others have since developed more precise models before launching into competency programs, but all of us are still innovating, changing, revising, and experimenting. I suspect that we will continue to do so for some years.

Our curriculum includes nine college-wide competencies which are required for graduation and which are predicated on several basic assumptions:

First, "curriculum" includes the total program of the college (in our case a small, residential college). By total program I mean the academic program, the activities formerly known as extra-curricular, and

campus life generally, including dormitory living, religious life, and social activities.

Second, "curriculum" includes the types of off-campus experiences that can provide students an opportunity to practice skills and/or to demonstrate competencies.

Third, "curriculum" is characterized by flexibility, at least to the extent possible in an institution of our type and with our student clientele. Flexibility to us means wide choice of courses and out-of-class experiences, changes in grading policies and in notions about the time factor as related to credits earned, openness to student-initiated experiences, and the capacity for continuous change.

In this framework competency is achieved as the student involves himself in a combination of the theoretical and the applied through a set of learning experiences, some in class and some out of class, designed to provide him with the cognitive, the affective, or the psycho-motor skills needed to reach the desired outcomes. Through classroom and field experiences provided in each competency the student has an opportunity to practice his skills and eventually to demonstrate them at the appropriate level. Competency is assessed by standardized tests, by classroom teachers, by evaluation teams, by observation and measurement, and, in many cases, by self-evaluation.

With such a wide variety of ways of achieving, demonstrating, and assessing competency, the liberal arts college can draw up a list of general competencies that is broad enough to include those characteristics that such colleges have always sought in their graduates--the intangible but nevertheless essential ingredients of the broadly-educated, value-oriented person. One can thus avoid the problem faced by those whose insistence upon precise measurement of behavioral objectives prevents

them from including in their lists of competencies any outcomes that cannot be evaluated in this manner. At Sterling, for instance, we have dared to articulate competencies which deal with such matters as awareness of values, understanding of the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of culture, and comprehension of the Christian heritage.

On the other hand, competency can also be required in the area of specialization, and here the objectives may well be more specifically stated and more precisely measured so that a graduating senior can present his prospective employer or a graduate school admissions committee with a portfolio containing evidence of demonstration of competency in his chosen field. At Sterling the area of specialization is a ninth competency in which components having to do with comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are required, as well as independent study and an integrating senior seminar.

As a dynamic for change and a way of infusing new life into a liberal arts curriculum the competency idea has much potential:

Competency leads to accountability to one's public through a clearer statement of institutional objectives so that an outsider can see a direct relationship between those goals--previously often vaguely stated in the first pages of the catalog--and the actual end product of the educational process--the graduate himself. Accountability comes home to the professor as he is obliged to think through his discipline in terms of outcomes rather than simply in terms of subject matter, and it gives pause for considerable soul-searching regarding the listing of competencies which one may not possess oneself! Better teaching is certain to eventuate. Accountability is also more directly perceived by the student. ACT student profiles indicate that freshmen entering Sterling College are seeking "meaning." A list of competencies set down in terms of precise objectives

makes a good deal more sense as a graduation requirement than a list of required courses, a minimum GPA, and a total number of credits to be accumulated. In selecting an area for specialization a student gets more help from lists of desired competencies than from statements of numbers of hours and specific courses required for various majors.

Competency leads to wholeness because broadly-based objectives in a curriculum that embraces the areas I mentioned earlier bring academic programs, student services, and extra-curricular activities together into an integrated and meaningful relationship. Although such integration takes great effort, we at Sterling are committed to moving in this direction as quickly as possible. Student services, which previously had almost nothing to do with the academic program, are becoming a significant part of the curriculum as a means of leading toward certain of the competencies; and a new administrative structure which puts the dean of students and the dean of instruction under a single vice-president for college affairs provides the machinery for this new emphasis. A whole new advising system which recognizes academic and personal advising as a teaching function and in terms of faculty load is another step in this direction.

Competency leads to relevance for a broader clientele. The older adult who returns to college from a work experience can be assessed in certain of the general competency areas at entrance and awarded credits for "life experiences." The talented student can accelerate as quickly as he can be assessed for competency. The less-talented or the part-time student can progress at his own rate without penalties related to time or grades. (Competency is achieved when it can be demonstrated--which has little to do with four years or how many times a certain course was attempted before it was finally passed.) The career-oriented student finds all kinds of possibilities for tailoring an area specialization

that may cut across several departments and developing a set of competencies to suit his specific vocational objectives; and the nurse, the accountant, or the retired insurance salesman may return to school to finish a degree or to concentrate on the liberalizing general education now recognized as needed to complement an already-demonstrated vocational competency.

In summary, let me say that competency-based education seems to be here to stay--at least for a while. If "competency" is to be more than just a catch-phrase or a meaningless label we use to dress up the same old curriculum we've always had, those of us in the liberal arts colleges need to articulate our own particular definition of the term, and we need to capitalize on our distinctive institutional characteristics to implement curricula that demonstrate accountability, wholeness, and relevance in courageous, student-centered, and future-oriented programs for American higher education.